

FTAP Effectiveness

EWS 2005

Subject Area General

FTAP Effectiveness
Contemporary Issue Paper
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8 February 2005

Report Documentation Page				Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.					
1. REPORT DATE 08 FEB 2005		2. REPORT TYPE		3. DATES COVERED 00-00-2005 to 00-00-2005	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE FTAP Effectiveness				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S)				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) United States Marine Corps,Command and Staff College, Marine Corps Combat Development Command,Marine Corps University, 2076 South Street,Quantico,VA,22134-5068				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release; distribution unlimited					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT Same as Report (SAR)	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 12	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT unclassified	b. ABSTRACT unclassified	c. THIS PAGE unclassified			

Very little argument exists amongst Marines on the question of whether the Marine Corps recruits and trains a high-quality first-term force. There is much debate, however, on how well the Corps is doing at maintaining the quality of this force through its retention efforts. There is much anecdotal evidence that indicates that the Corps is failing to retain its best people and thus weakening the quality of the career force. However, the First Term Alignment Program is in fact building a strong enlisted career force by retaining our best Marines, reducing our population of under-performing Marines, and reenlisting a population whose average performance is better than the first-term population it was drawn from.

Background

The Marine Corps' objective with regard to the enlisted career force is "to provide the Marine Corps with the most qualified force by grade and MOS to support staffing all authorized career force billets."¹ The primary vehicle for accomplishing this is the First Term Alignment Plan (FTAP). FTAP is designed to encourage the best Marines to stay and improve the quality of the career force. In general terms, the program does this by requiring competition among Marines who

¹United States Marine Corps, *MCO P1040.31J: Enlisted Retention and Career Development Manual*, 2004, 1-3

want to reenlist for the limited number of "boatspaces" (slots for reenlistment) for each MOS.²

More specifically, the program begins with reenlistment target numbers. Boatspaces for reenlistment are assigned to each MOS, based on what is needed to maintain the appropriate career force numbers. Reenlistment-eligible Marines (those whose EAS date falls within that particular fiscal year—hereafter referred to as the FTAP population) are then required to compete to achieve a boatspace within their MOS. Only Marines who meet minimum standards are allowed to compete for reenlistment (Of note here, only Marines with proficiency and conduct marks above 4.0 are eligible to reenlist). Incentives established for reenlistment include extra pay, choice of duty station, and seats at the most sought-after schools. Finally, limited numbers of above-average Marines are permitted to reenlist in their MOS even if it is full.³

This combination of policies should allow the Marine Corps to retain its best, force out its worst, and give it a career force that is of better quality than the first-term force. However, anecdotal evidence would seem to indicate that this is not the case.

²United States Marine Corps, *MARADMIN 290/03 FY04 Enlisted Retention Guidelines*, 2003, 1-5

³United States Marine Corps, *MARADMIN 290/03 FY04 Enlisted Retention Guidelines*, 2003, 1-5

Anecdotal Evidence

One frequently heard story amongst Marines is of the stellar Marine who gets out. One of the best Marines in the unit is up for reenlistment, but is told by the career planner that the only job available is something he doesn't want to do (recruiting, for example). Because he is a hard worker with military experience, he finds that he is in demand as a worker in the civilian world. He finds a job and so he reluctantly leaves the Corps.

The converse of this story is also told. A mediocre Marine just barely meeting the standard is up for reenlistment. He's not a hard worker and isn't particularly interested in "pounding the pavement" to find a job in the civilian world. He talks to his career planner and is able to a job that suits him, and thus stays in the Marine Corps.

There are innumerable tales of how our best Marines are leaving the Corps and how the mediocre are allowed to continue on. It is implied that as we lose our best Marines, the quality of the population that remains is diminished. Numerous explanations are offered as to why FTAP (which should be producing a high-quality career force) is unsuccessful in retaining our best people. Here are a few. "The incentives are unreliable and limited to MOS's where no one wants to stay." "Substandard Marines slide by because all of the standards are

waiverable." "It doesn't matter if there is competition for boatspaces if none of the good people are competing." A certain amount of truth exists in all of these assertions, and undoubtedly many of the stories about good individual Marines getting out are true. However, the statistical evidence contradicts this view of Marine Corps retention.

Statistical Evidence

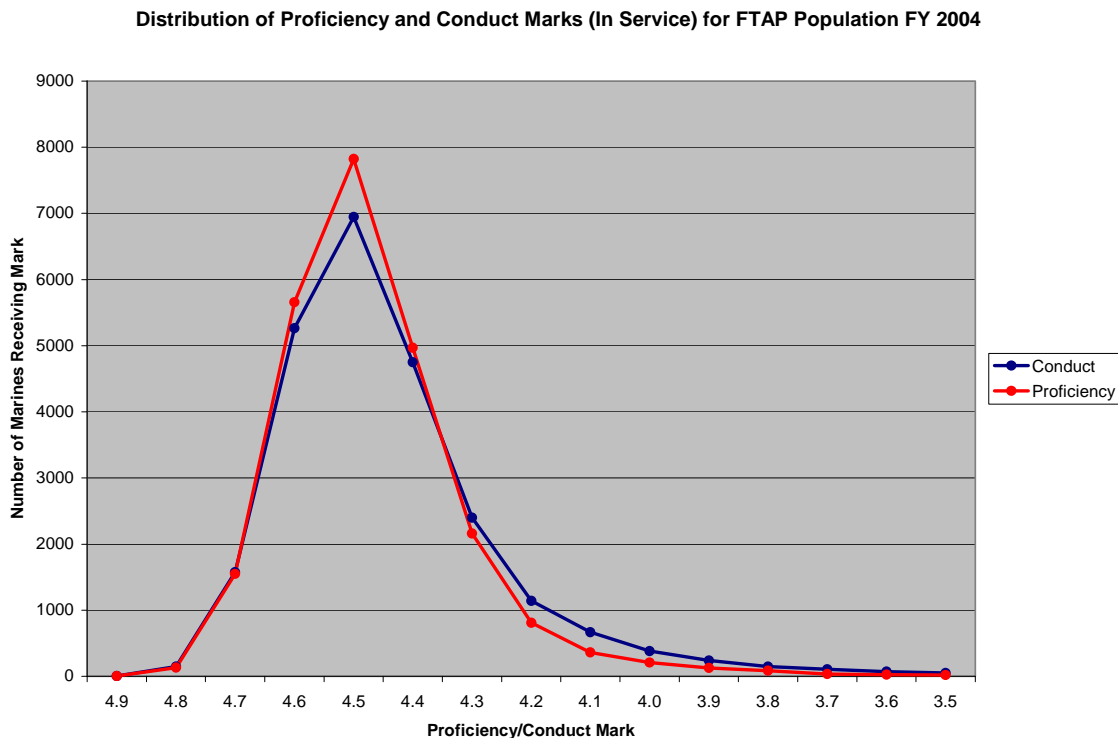
Retention rates compared to proficiency and conduct marks gives a true indication of how the Marine Corps is doing in its retention efforts. Manpower and Reserve Affairs provided information on 24,064 first-term Marines who were up for reenlistment in FY 2004. Of these Marines, 1,537 extended their original enlistment beyond FY 2004, thereby placing themselves in the FY 2005 FTAP population. This left 22,527 Marines in the FY 2004 FTAP population. Of these Marines, 5,280 reenlisted, for a reenlistment rate of 23.44%.⁴

Proficiency and conduct marks are the standard means of evaluation for enlisted Marines below the rank of sergeant. As per Marine Corps Order P1070.12K (Marine Corps Individual Records Administration Manual), they are assigned according to the following scale:

⁴United States Marine Corps (Manpower and Reserve Affairs), Fiscal Year 2004 Retention Database

0.0 to 1.9	Unacceptable
2.0 to 2.9	Unsatisfactory
3.0 to 3.9	Below Average
4.0 to 4.4	Average
4.5 to 4.8	Excellent
4.9 to 5.0	Outstanding ⁵

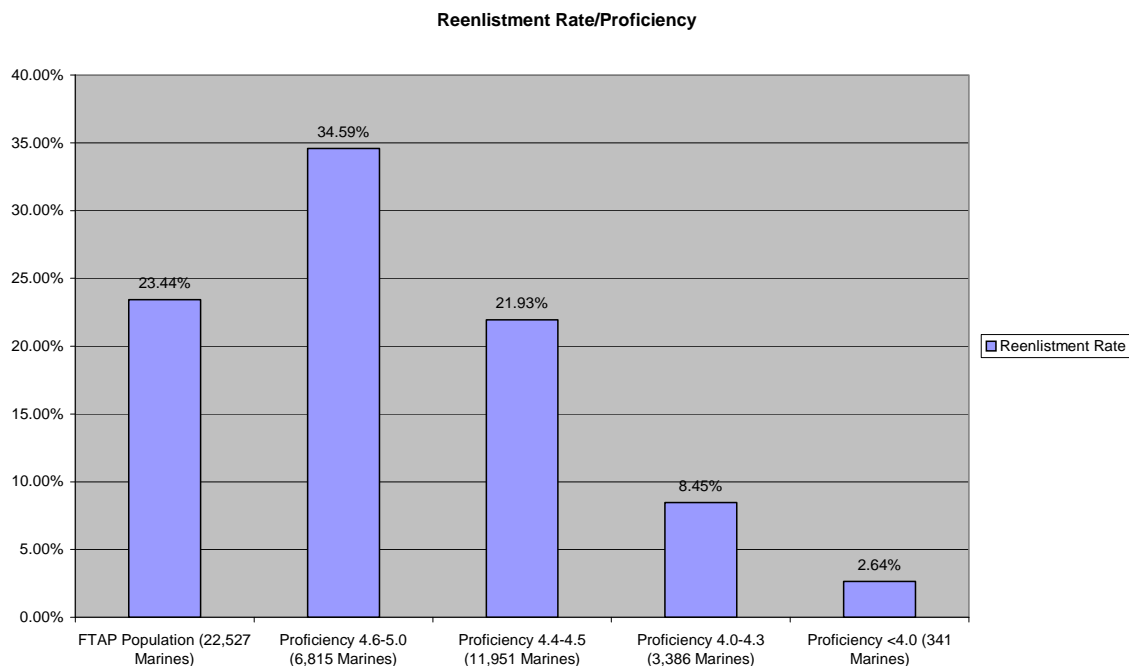
This scale does not necessarily reflect how the numbers are assigned in practice, however. Marks below 4.0 are very rarely assigned without disciplinary action being involved. A certain amount of subjectivity and variation exists from command to



command in issuing the marks. Therefore it is necessary to establish the average proficiency and conduct marks for the FY 2004 FTAP population to give a benchmark for determining the

⁵ United States Marine Corps, *MCO P1070.12K Marine Corps Individual Records Administration Manual*, 2000, 123-125

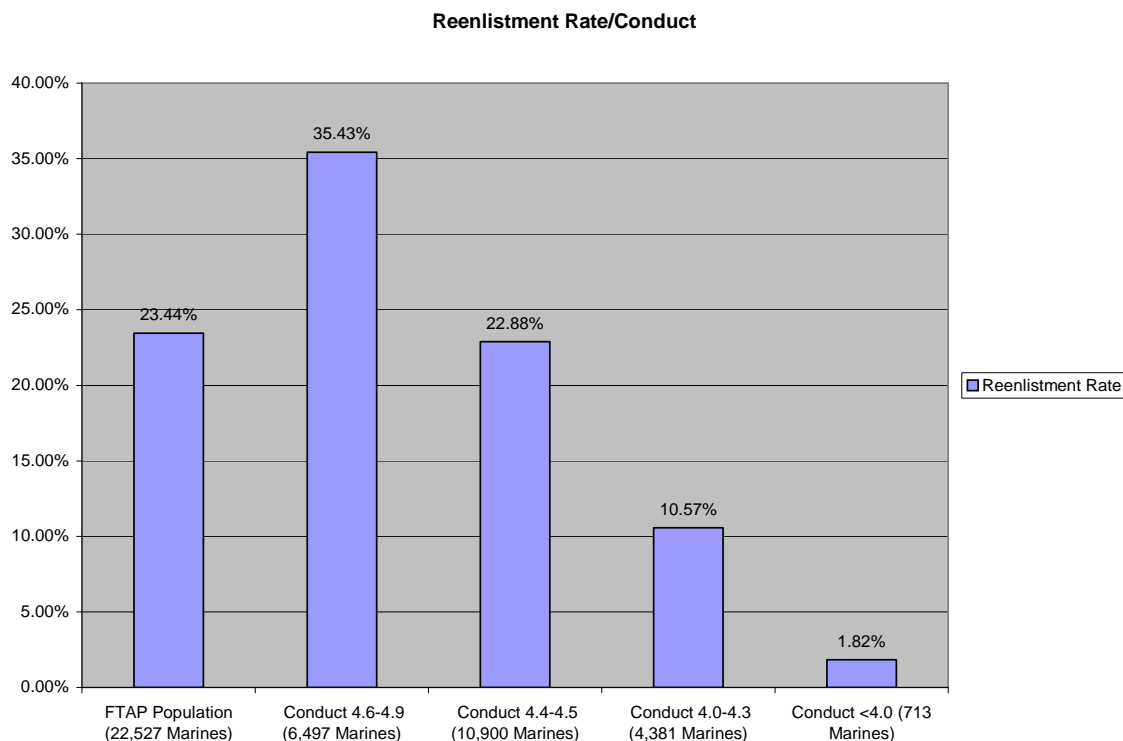
quality of Marines. The average proficiency mark for the population was 4.46. The average conduct mark for the population was 4.43. The mode score (the score occurring most often) was 4.5 for both proficiency and conduct. The population was then divided into four groups: those with scores above 4.5 (our best Marines), those with scores between 4.4 and 4.5 (average Marines), those with scores between 4.0 and 4.3 (below-average Marines), and those with scores below 4.0 (unsatisfactory Marines).⁶



The reenlistment rates of those whose scores were above 4.5 show how well the Marine Corps is doing at retaining the best Marines. The total number of Marines from the FY 2004 FTAP

⁶United States Marine Corps (Manpower and Reserve Affairs), Fiscal Year 2004 Retention Database

population whose proficiency was above 4.5 was 6,815. Of these, 2,357 reenlisted, for a reenlistment rate of 34.59%. The total number of Marines whose conduct was above 4.5 was 6,497. Of these, 2302 reenlisted, for a reenlistment rate of 35.43%. Both of these numbers are more than ten points higher than the reenlistment rate for the population as a whole (23.44%). The Marine Corps is actually retaining its best Marines at a greater rate than the overall FTAP population.⁷

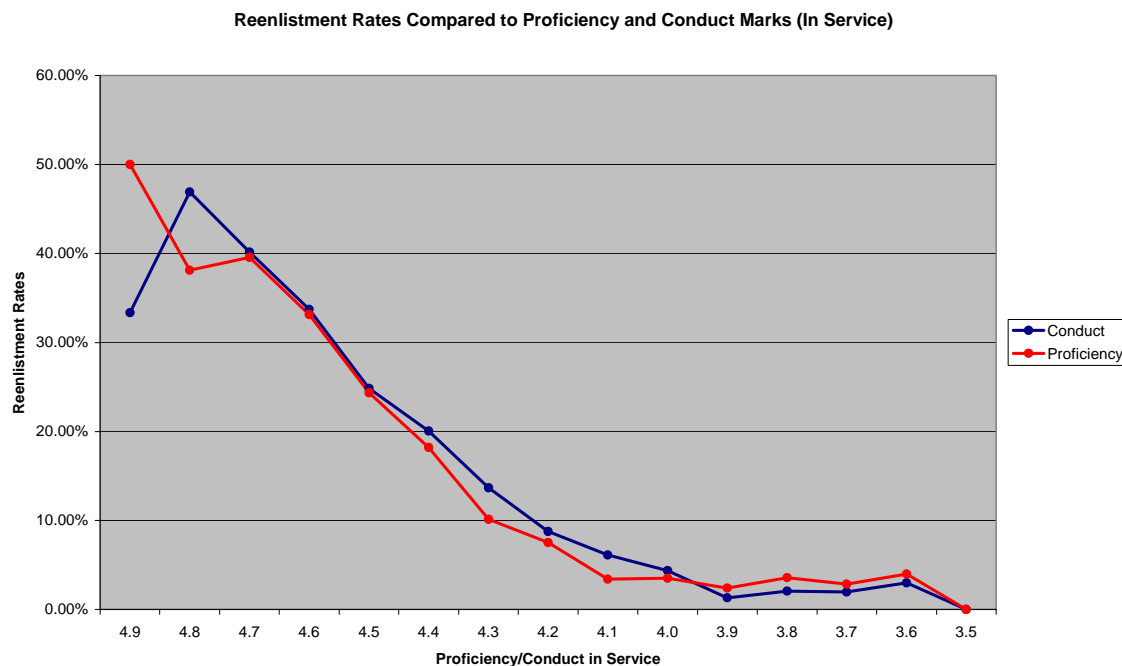


The groups below 4.4 exhibit the opposite. The total number of Marines from the population whose proficiency was between 4.0 and 4.3 was 3,386. Of these, just 286 reenlisted—an

⁷ United States Marine Corps (Manpower and Reserve Affairs), Fiscal Year 2004 Retention Database

8.45% reenlistment rate. The total number whose conduct was between 4.0 and 4.3 was 4,381. Of these 463 reenlisted—a 10.57% reenlistment rate.⁸

The numbers for Marines below 4.0 are even lower. Of 341 whose proficiency was below 4.0, just nine reenlisted (2.64%).

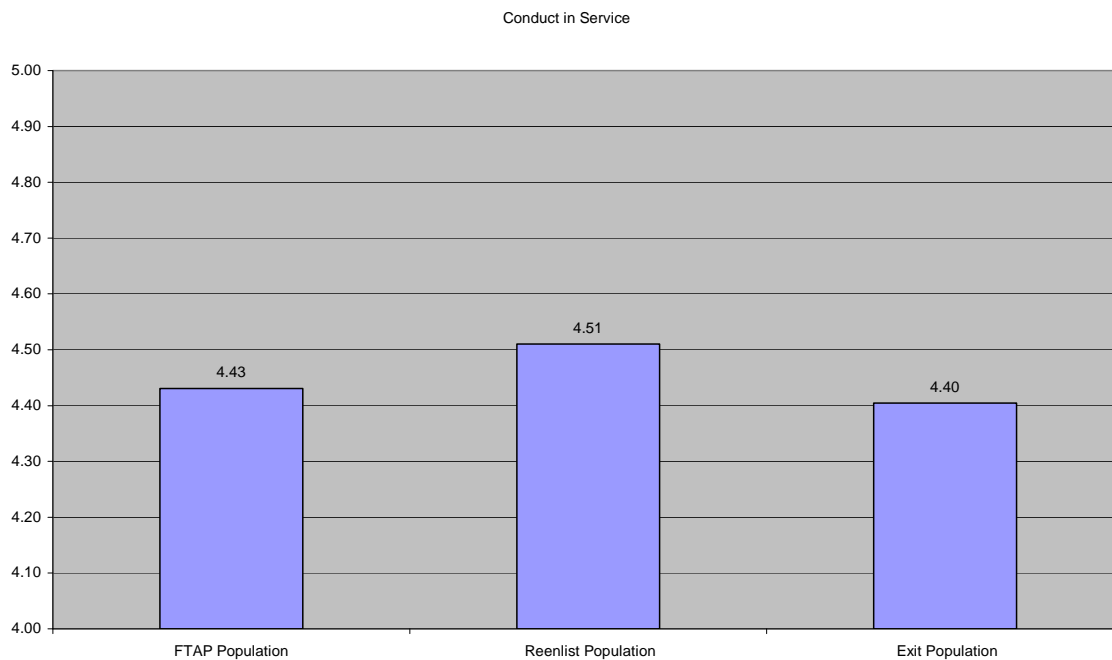


Of 713 whose conduct was below 4.0, thirteen reenlisted (1.82%). The below-average and substandard performers are reenlisting at rates more than ten points below the rate for the whole population. A look at the chart above makes it even more clear: the higher a Marine's proficiency and conduct marks, the more likely that Marine is to reenlist.⁹

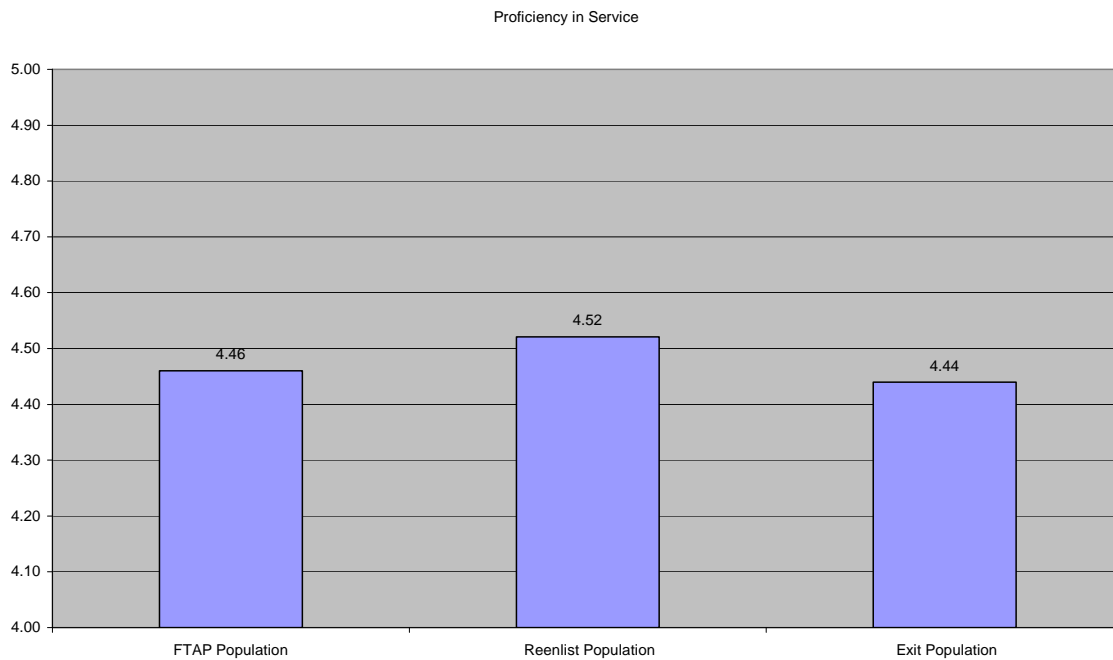
⁸ United States Marine Corps (Manpower and Reserve Affairs), Fiscal Year 2004 Retention Database

⁹ United States Marine Corps (Manpower and Reserve Affairs), Fiscal Year 2004 Retention Database

The average proficiency of the population that reenlisted is 4.52, more than half a point higher than that of the FTAP population. The average conduct of the population that reenlisted is 4.51, nearly 7/10 of a point higher than the FTAP population. Both scores are nearly a full point higher than that of those that left the Marine Corps. Thus the scores of those that entered the career force in FY 2004 are significantly higher than those of the first-term population they were drawn from.¹⁰



¹⁰United States Marine Corps (Manpower and Reserve Affairs), Fiscal Year 2004 Retention Database



Conclusion

Although there are a lot of stories told in the Marine Corps about how the best Marines are getting out, leaving the mediocre to form the backbone of the career force, this is simply not true. The statistical evidence demonstrates that the First Term Alignment Program is building a strong enlisted career force by retaining the best Marines, reducing the population of under-performing Marines, and reenlisting a population whose average performance is better than the first-term population it was drawn from.

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